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Quinn Fabish

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

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Starting Anew: Jewish Immigrants and Refugees sent to America's Midwest from Nazi and Post  
WWII Germany

Quinn Fabish  
Augustana College  
March 11, 2021

The sudden rise of the Nazi Party's power in Germany on August 2, 1934, due to the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor/Fuhrer of Germany, created a surplus of Jewish people in a state of limbo.<sup>1</sup> They were at risk of being persecuted in their home country. These Jewish people sought refuge in the neighboring countries of Germany and in countries like the United States and Canada.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, many Jewish people were not granted refuge in the United States and instead spent years in the neighboring countries of Germany. When the war ended and the Allied Powers took control over Germany, many of these Jewish people in the surrounding countries decided to immigrate to the United States. Marion Blumenthal Lazan was one of these persons. In 1948, she and her family left for New York on April 23, 3 years after their liberation.<sup>3</sup> After spending some time in New York, the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, also known as HIAS, decided Marion and her family's next home would be in Peoria, Illinois. Lazan had never heard of the Midwest before, let alone Peoria, Illinois. Many people assume that Jewish immigrants and refugees were sent to places like New York on the East Coast, and Los Angeles on the West Coast. However, due to Marion Blumenthal Lazan's testimony, we know that this is not true in all cases. Scholarly sources have talked about why Jewish refugees and immigrants were sent to very urban areas on the east and west coast, but almost none have

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<sup>1</sup> History.com Editors, "Hitler Becomes Dictator of Germany," HISTORY, A & E Television Networks, Last modified August 3 2020, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/hitler-becomes-fuhrer>.

<sup>2</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Refugees," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed November 10, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/refugees>.

<sup>3</sup> Marion Blumenthal Lazan, interview by Quinn Fabish, November 2, 2020.

explored why Jewish refugees and immigrants were sent to the Midwest. This paper serves to investigate the reasoning as to why Jewish refugees and immigrants were sent to places in the Midwest. This investigation revealed that the general reasons why Jewish immigrants and refugees were sent to the Midwest were rooted in potential economic opportunities as well as their assimilation into American society. Living in the Midwest provided a way for Jewish immigrants and refugees to successfully integrate into American society and officially begin their lives in the United States.

It is important to acknowledge that while there were some Jewish immigrants and refugees that came to the Midwest, a majority of them preferred to stay on the East and West Coast in the largely populated, urban areas that already had well established Jewish communities. Manfred Kirchheimer, a documentary filmmaker, was born in Germany and immigrated with his parents to the United States when he was five years old, in 1936, in order to escape Nazi Germany.<sup>4</sup> He and his family settled in New York City. This was where he grew up, where he began his adult life. In his documentary film “We Were So Beloved: The German Jews of Washington Heights” Kirchheimer shares some of his personal experiences as well as interviews with several other Jews from New York City. Kirchheimer details how there was a Jewish District in Washington Heights that provided a way for Jewish refugees and immigrants to easily assimilate into American life within the comfort of their own community.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it wasn’t particularly easy to successfully settle in the Midwest. Haim Genizi, who wrote about Jewish Refugees and immigrants from Nazi Germany throughout the years 1936-1945 in “New York is Big - America is Bigger. The Resettlement of Refugees from Nazism, 1936-1945”, chronicles the attempts made to resettle refugees from Germany away from the

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<sup>4</sup> Manfred Kirchheimer, “We Were So Beloved: The German Jews of Washington Heights,” directed by Manfred Kirchheimer (2011, New York, NY), documentary.

<sup>5</sup> Kirchheimer, “We Were so Beloved...”

hyper-concentrated New York area.<sup>6</sup> However, Genizi acknowledges that “while there were refugees who were determined to remain outside of New York, in spite of the difficulties, others were disappointed with their experiences and returned to the metropolis”.<sup>7</sup> Data from the National Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees and Emigrés Coming from Germany suggests that anywhere from twelve to twenty percent of refugees that attempted to settle in the Midwest ended up returning to the New York Area.<sup>8</sup> While there are personal accounts of success stories, much like Manfred Kirchheimer’s story, as well as the fact that the numbers of Jewish refugees and immigrants living in urban areas like New York were higher, this paper is not serving to argue as to which area of the United States had more Jewish immigrants and refugees but rather to aid in understanding a minority community. The Midwest was less concentrated than those areas, and as such provided a higher chance at succeeding economically and at acclimating into American life and society.

The instability that came with the sudden shift of power when Hitler was appointed Chancellor was not a shock. Germany, as well as most of Europe, had been in a sense of destabilization ever since the end of the first World War. In fact, shortly after the end of World War I came the Nazi Party. Many of the issues that were the root of the second World War came from many of the unresolved matters left over from World War I.<sup>9</sup> In the years preceding World War II, feelings of Anti-Semitism started to grow, to fester, and spread throughout the land infecting the minds of many German citizens.<sup>10</sup> Nazi propaganda and media split Jewish people,

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<sup>6</sup> Haim Genizi, “New York is Big--America is Bigger: The Resettlement of Refugees from Nazism, 1936-1945,” *Jewish Social Studies* 46, no. 1 (1984): 61.

<sup>7</sup> Haim Genizi, “New York is Big...”: 69.

<sup>8</sup> Haim Genizi “New York is Big...”: 69.

<sup>9</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Hitler Comes to Power,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed November 10, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/hitler-comes-to-power?series=31>.

<sup>10</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “The Nazi Terror Begins,” Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed November 10, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-terror-begins?series=31>.

even if they were German citizens, into a completely different category from non-Jewish Germans. They painted Jewish people as the root of all problems that Germans faced—political, social, and economical.<sup>11</sup> Nazi propaganda spurred acts of destruction towards Jews and their property. Many Jewish people during these years sought refuge in other countries. Kristallnacht, also known as The November Pogrom of 1938 marked the shift from destruction to deadly acts of violence and genocide. Businesses were destroyed, Jews were murdered, and Jewish people were placed in concentration camps. This marks the beginning of what we know as the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, during this time period escaping was incredibly difficult. And it wasn't until 1945 that those in the concentration camps were liberated. This generated an influx of survivors from Germany and surrounding countries to seek immigration to the United States for new and better opportunities.

Jewish people, although reluctant, began to emigrate in the years before World War II. This tended to be to neighboring countries. However, with the conclusion of World War II, people generally preferred to immigrate to the United States. This was due to many reasons, one important reason being that a lot of Jewish immigrants had relatives in the United States that would be able to provide them with the financial affidavits needed in order to begin the visa application process.<sup>13</sup> Places like New York City or Los Angeles tended to be what refugees and immigrants pictured when they thought about living in the United States. These metropolis, urban places were very popular with immigrants and refugees. There were already pre-established German and Jewish communities there which created a sense of belonging and appeared welcoming to the Jewish peoples. However, settling in cities like New York City and

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<sup>11</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Antisemitism in History: Nazi Antisemitism," Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Accessed November 10, 2020, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/antisemitism-in-history-nazi-antisemitism>.

<sup>12</sup> United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Antisemitism in History: Nazi..."

<sup>13</sup> Anne C. Schenderlein, *Germany on their Minds: German Jewish Refugees in the United States and their Relationships with Germany, 1938-1988*, 14.

Los Angeles was not the case all the time. Other immigrants and refugees went to places completely different upon arrival to the States—places like the Midwest. Some historians might argue that the Jewish refugees and immigrants who were sent to the Midwest, were not sent there due to the sole reason that it would have allowed them to easily acclimate into American society, otherwise there would have been more of them that stayed. However, it is important to take note that the statistics for this argument are based on official reports from relief organizations. Not every Jewish refugee and immigrant that left the New York Area used a relief organization when they were trying to find a place to settle in the United States. It is possible that the number of Jewish refugees and immigrants that settled in the Midwest is much higher, but they did not require the help of relief organizations so their case was never logged. Furthermore, the data from the National Coordinating Committee for Aid to Refugees and Emigrés Coming from Germany still shows that eighty to eighty-eight percent of refugees that attempted to settle in the Midwest did not return to the New York area. While we may not know the true number of Jewish immigrants and refugees that settled in the Midwest due to a lack of data, we do know, due to several oral histories, that many did come to the Midwest for opportunities, hoping to integrate into new society.

Marion Blumenthal Lazan is one of the unknown number of Jewish people who were sent to the Midwest upon coming to the United States. Lazan is a survivor of the Holocaust. Lazan, her mother, and her older brother came to New York City on April 23, 1948. Lazan's Aunt lived in New York City, having emigrated from Germany years before. In her interview, Lazan stated that she and her family only stayed with her aunt for a couple of weeks. They were moved to a temporary home located in Capital Hall in New York City owned by the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS), while HIAS searched for a permanent home for her and her

family.<sup>14</sup> Lazan states that HIAS informed her and her family that they “found a home for us in Peoria, Illinois.”—a home that they would share with two other Jewish families.<sup>15</sup> Lazan explained that at this time there were not really any centers or groups for Jewish people other than the local synagogue. However, many of the local families were incredibly helpful to her and her family while they were adjusting to American life. Lazan claims that it is certainly possible that the Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, as well as other organizations at the time that helped find homes for Jewish refugees and immigrants, decided to send her and her family to the Midwest due to the fact that it was a smaller place and perhaps people wouldn’t feel so lost—that in urban cities, it is so big that it is hard to connect with people. With smaller areas, people have closer contact with each other which helps expedite relationships and the other residents in the town would be more likely to help them.<sup>16</sup> Lazan also declared that the reason she and her family were moved out of New York City was because it was severely overcrowded, overwhelmed with the amount of refugees coming from Europe.

New York City often is what first comes to mind when people think about refugees and immigrants in general coming to the United States. New York City has been the center of refugee and immigration history since the 1800s.<sup>17</sup> In his work about Jewish and Christian refugees in New York City, Haim Genizi explores all of the different ways Jewish and Christian refugees were resettled away from the New York area. This was in response to the unemployment rates. Genizi writes that the resettlement was not only beneficial for the refugees but for the American Community as a whole. Genizi argues that while the resettlement benefited the refugees economically, as well as the “native Americans” who already lived in the New York

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Berger, “The Many Lives of a New York SRO,” The New York Times, The New York Times, Last modified June 4, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/05/nyregion/the-many-lives-of-a-new-york-sro.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Marion Blumenthal Lazan, interview by Quinn Fabish.

<sup>16</sup> Marion Blumenthal Lazan, interview by Quinn Fabish.

<sup>17</sup> History.com Editors, “U.S. Immigration Before 1965,” HISTORY, A & E Television Networks, Last modified July 28, 2020, <https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/u-s-immigration-before-1965>.



area, the resettlement would also help these refugees in regards to integrating into American social and cultural life.<sup>18</sup> While these refugees were reluctant to leave the New York area in which there were already pre-established communities to places that they had never heard of before, resettling them would allow them to assimilate into society, rather than staying in their own bubble. This is reflected in Marion Blumenthal Lazan's personal account about when she describes the moment she found out where HIAS was sending her and her family. Many committees were created with one goal in mind: to find jobs for refugees outside of the New York City areas.<sup>19</sup> These committees tended to find more jobs in the Midwest rather than the East Coast, West Coast, or even the South. Many immigrants and refugees were reluctant to leave the New York area as they were surrounded by others like them and had a sense of community already established. However, success was hard to find in these overcrowded cities. Rural areas in the Midwest could provide a breath of fresh air.

While not common, there were some cities in the Midwest that did have established Jewish communities which allowed for more opportunities. Many of these Jewish communities were due to *The Workmen's Circle*. "The Workmen's Circle in the Midwest 1900-1950" written by a University of Nebraska, Professor of History Oliver B. Pollack describes the establishment of Jewish communities in the Midwest over the first half of the 20th century.<sup>20</sup> Before the first half of the 20th century, there were many Jewish communities on the East and West Coasts, located in more urban areas. The Workmen's Circle, often described as providing a "sense of belonging" and of "camaraderie and purpose" started instituting branches in the Midwest in the early 1900s.<sup>21</sup> These branches spread out from the Northeast and settled in states such as Wisconsin,

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<sup>18</sup> Heim Genizi, "New York is Big...": 61.

<sup>19</sup> Heim Genizi, "New York is Big...": 62-64.

<sup>20</sup> "Oliver B. Pollack," Nebraska Authors.

<sup>21</sup> Oliver B. Pollack, "The Workmen's Circle in the Midwest 1900-1950," :315

Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota. There were even specific districts in the Midwest, such as the Great Lakes Region, Philadelphia District and the Michigan District. Pollak argues that by establishing these communities in the beginning of the 20th century, Jewish people would come there as they would want to be in an area that already had a Jewish community and could lead to more opportunities.

Many Jewish immigrants and refugees that came to the United States also share a similar story of ending up in the Midwest. Charles Adler was arrested the night of Kristallnacht in November 1938 and was sent to Dachau Concentration Camp.<sup>22</sup> He spent four months there before he was released, upon which he spent the next few months getting his papers organized in order to immigrate to the United States. His brother's friend provided a financial affidavit that allowed Adler to immigrate to the United States. Once here, Adler stayed with his brother's friends in Chicago where he ended up finding a long lasting job. The story of Bernhard Ebstein is another example of how the Midwest was able to provide for immigrants and refugees.<sup>23</sup> Ebstein's family wanted to get out of Germany. Unfortunately, their affidavit only covered one person traveling to the United States. The American embassy recommended that Ebstein's father go to America, and then get a job to cover the affidavit for the rest of his family. In Spring of 1939, Ebstein's father was sent by the New York chapter of the Joint Distribution Committee, a Jewish humanitarian organization, to St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>24</sup> They had hopes that it would be easier for him to find a job in the Midwest. Ebstein's father heard about a series of stores owned by a Jewish family in Southern Illinois that were looking for hires which he ultimately ended up getting. The Jewish family that owned these stores, as well as the Jewish community of

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<sup>22</sup> Oral History Interview with Charles Adler, interview by The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, August 19, 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Oral History Interview with Bernhard Ebstein, interview by The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 17, 1986.

<sup>24</sup> "Get to Know More About Us," JDC, Accessed December 8, 2020, <https://www.jdc.org/about/>.

Southern Illinois supplied the affidavit required for Bernhard Ebstein, his mother, and his sister to also come to the United States, as his father's job alone would not provide sufficient financial support. In October of 1939, Ebstein and his family were able to leave Germany for the United States.<sup>25</sup> Both of these stories illustrate how the Midwest was able to provide economic opportunities and means where New York City lacked due to the overcrowded population, as well as how the pre-establishment of Jewish Communities in parts of the Midwest went a long way in Jewish immigrants and refugees integration into American society.

Organizations and Committees were very important to the transition of Jewish refugees and immigrants into American life. Based out of New York City, The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, also known as HIAS, was formed in 1881 with the sole purpose to assist Jews fleeing from Russia and Eastern Europe.<sup>26</sup> Its role changed throughout the years and held a very important position during the era of Nazi Germany, World War II, and post-WWII Germany. The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society was involved with the settlement of many immigrants and refugees including Marion Blumenthal Lazan and Charles Adler. The Americans Friends Service Committee is another organization that was very important during this time period. Created in 1917 by Quakers, AFSC is concerned with peace and social justice.<sup>27</sup> The Americans Friends Service Committee is known for placing people who needed help into Hostels that they owned. During World War II, the AFSC opened the Scattergood Hostel to provide support to refugees from Germany. Scattergood Hostel was located on a small farm in rural West Branch, Iowa that opened on April 20, 1939 and ran for over four years.<sup>28</sup> The AFSC, in an effort to

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<sup>25</sup> Oral History Interview with Bernhard Ebstein, interview by The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

<sup>26</sup> Hebrew Immigration Aid Society, "History," HIAS, Accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.hias.org/who/history>.

<sup>27</sup> American Friends Service Committee, "About Us," American Friends Service Committee, Accessed November 20, 2020, <https://www.afsc.org/about-us>.

<sup>28</sup> "Welcome to Scattergood," German Iowa and the Global Midwest, Prof. Glenn Ehrstine, Department of German, University of Iowa, Accessed November 12, 2020, <https://germansiniowa.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibitsshow/refugee/intro>.

destigmatize the word ‘refugee’, referred to the people staying at the hostel as ‘guests’. Here was a safe haven that allowed refugees to peacefully integrate into American society.<sup>29</sup> Guests were expected to take care of the land that they were staying on. This included everybody learning hands on skills, breaking the barriers of traditional gender norms.<sup>30</sup> Guests were taught how to speak and write English, as well as necessary skills needed for jobs in America. Children at the Scattergood Hostel were allowed to go to the school in West Branch, Iowa. Many of the residents of the Scattergood Hostel claimed that their time there allowed for community bonding, they bonded with each other and to America itself. And because the Hostel was in a rural area, there was a lot of interaction between the locals and the guests.<sup>31</sup> During their time at Scattergood Hostel, employees of the Hostel would search for jobs all over the Midwest for the guests staying there.<sup>32</sup> This small community allowed for refugees to peacefully transition into American life.

The Midwest holds a silent but significant role in most of the United States history, and this certainly rings true with the case of Jewish refugees and immigrants that came to America during Nazi Germany, World War II, and the years following. People like Marion Blumenthal Lazan, Charles Adler, and Bernharb Ebstein all provide honest, first hand accounts of what it was like for them and their family living as immigrants or refugees in the American Midwest. Jewish immigrants and refugees were sent to the rural midwest from large, urban areas as it not only provided them more potential economic opportunities, but it allowed them to more easily

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<sup>29</sup> “Conditions of Refuge,” German Iowa and the Global Midwest, Prof. Glenn Ehrstine, Department of German, University of Iowa, Accessed November 12, 2020, <https://germansiniowa.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/refugee/conditions>.

<sup>30</sup> “Adjusting to a New Houselife,” German Iowa and the Global Midwest, Prof. Glenn Ehrstine, Department of German, University of Iowa, Accessed November 12, 2020, <https://germansiniowa.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/refugee/housework>.

<sup>31</sup> “Joy in the Midwest,” German Iowa and the Global Midwest, Prof. Glenn Ehrstine, Department of German, University of Iowa, Accessed November 12, 2020, <https://germansiniowa.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/refugee/midwest>.

<sup>32</sup> “Leaving Scattergood,” German Iowa and the Global Midwest, Prof. Glenn Ehrstine, Department of German, University of Iowa, Accessed November 12, 2020, <https://germansiniowa.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/refugee/timeline>.

assimilate into American life by thrusting them into everyday life and gently forcing them to step out of their comfort zone and interact with other American citizens. Whether this was through random odd jobs, through Hostels across the Midwest, pre-established Jewish communities, or through relief organizations whose sole purpose was to find these people homes, the rural midwest can be considered the backbone of many Jewish immigrants' and refugees' introduction into American society.

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